

Dance, Song, and the Festive



What Abby Heller-Burnham's "Learning to Dance" and Picasso's "Old Guitarist" have in common is a strange and intricate architecture, oriented around the celebratory aspects of human experience; in this case, dance and song. The composition of Heller-Burnham's painting is positively giddy; the motif of a spatial "double," one slightly taller than the other, repeats almost infinitely, through every figure to every slightly smaller figure and through the form of the building too. In Heller-Burnham's case, the "doubles" are all verticals; just as dancing is done vertically. In Picasso, the ecstatic nature of the piece expresses itself in dozens of vertical to horizontal harmonies; lineation infused with the harmony of song. Though this Picasso piece is from his blue period, the old guitarist expresses a certain amount not only of harmony but of dignity in his elegant posture and limbs. Likewise, Heller-Burnham's dancers are lean and graceful, even as the color range she employs is dusky. If chiaroscuro were absent in either case, the paintings would lose a sense of balance and edge. Part of the festive expressed here is that the darkness is included. When everything is balanced, a solidity emerges in both cases which enables all the optic tricks to work their magic without being cloying.